

## **A Walk to Restoration: West Hill Cemetery & Chapel**

**By Kimberly Johnson**

Have you ever found a treasure in your own back yard? Unexpectedly, that is what happened to Alderman Terry Christie as he took an early morning stroll through the historic West Hill Cemetery in Dalton, Georgia. Dr. Christie, and his beloved furry companion, practiced a morning ritual of walking through the cemetery since it is located directly behind their neighborhood. The centerpiece of the cemetery happened to be a dilapidated stone building with plywood covered windows. The building, which many children believed to be haunted, had been left abandoned since the 1970's. Not knowing off hand who owned the property, he wondered if the city government could do anything with the structure. Christie decided to take the idea before the Mayor and City Council to gather their thoughts and opinions. During the meeting, the group was made aware of the fact that the city of Dalton owned the building. Realizing that the property was used by their own public works department to store lawn equipment, the group jumped on the revitalizing bandwagon, forming a committee and polling the public for support.

Within days of the project announcement, phone calls began to pour in and 41 city residents wanted to offer money and time to the cause. Hundreds of Dalton residents utilize the cemetery for recreation and exercise on a daily basis. They consider the area to be more of a park rather than a graveyard. The need for revitalization had been evident for quite some time and the group was relieved to find out their city government cared about this historical structure. The support for the project took on a life of its' own and the city fathers knew the Chapel would have a successful new beginning.

Dalton City Council offered the guidance of Walter Parsons, deputy city administrator and former building inspector, to oversee the project and coordinate all construction efforts. The West Hill committee formed a set of goals and objectives. The group was broken down into various categories, including memorials, landscaping, future use planning, design review, grave marker survey and history committees. This gave the group the ability to pay the needed attention to project details. In the summer of 2000, the city had already begun phase one of the project, restoring the 60 year old roof. The Chapel, built in 1941, had had no repairs of any kind since its' initial construction. Dalton Public Works Department would perform most of the reconstruction efforts, thus saving taxpayer dollars. The crew worked on replacing window frames and glass, refinishing existing wood beams, updating plumbing and electrical units and laying out lush landscaping. The project took approximately three years to complete, but turned out to be more than the public could ever imagine. The details of the building: replicated windows, doors and hardware, turned out to be a major expense for the project. The Dalton community came together offering over \$42,000 in donations. The money to restore the unique details were given in honor and remembrance of loved ones. It was apparent that the community of Dalton recognized this piece of history as a significant part of their family life and

wanted to help with preservation efforts in any way possible.

Finally, on a rainy Saturday in June 2003, the city held a special dedication service and open house for the renovated structure. Once again, the support of the community was apparent with over sixty people, including local media, packed in the main hall of the Chapel. The ceremony included recognition of the hardworking individuals involved in the project and specifics on how the property would be used in the future. Attendees could not help but go on and on about the quality of work and quaint nature of the Chapel. Many who had never known the history of the building couldn't believe it was only 60 years old, as it had appeared much older.

### **Chain Reaction**

Once the city began the West Hill Chapel restoration project, officials noticed the neglect of the adjacent cemetery. West Hill Cemetery, with graves dating back to the early 1800's, had seen its' share of broken head stones and vandalized monuments over the years. Recent efforts to give this area more vitality and appeal became a struggle due to ignorant disregard. Awareness brought this piece of history back to life. The city decided to upgrade the bland main entrance by repaving the roadway, adding decorative street lamps and adding a marvelous iron gate. The lighting offered a sense of security to residents who exercised in the early morning and evenings. All-in-all, the decorative details played an important safety role in the mission to enhance this area.

The West Hill Cemetery is the final resting place for a number of Confederate Soldiers and famous historical figures.

- Anthony Johnson (AJ) Showalter (1858-1924)-Composer of music; better known for the song "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms."
- Harry "Suitcase" Simpson (1925-1979)-Major League Baseball Player; he was known as "Suitcase" due to playing with 17 different Negro, Major and Minor League teams throughout his professional career.
- Dale Singleton (1955-1985)-Hall of Fame Motorcyclist. Two time winner of the Daytona 200 and the 1981 AMA road race championship.
- Bryan Thomas (1836-1905)-Brigadier General, Confederate States Army.
- Duff Green (1791-1875)-General, Confederate States Army.

In September of 2002, the Georgia Historical Society, city of Dalton and the Historic Preservation Commission gathered to celebrate the recognition of the "Campaign for Atlanta: Johnston's Review" historical marker. Local historians discovered that the area was the site of

General Joseph E. Johnston's review of his troops in 1864. Text inscribed on the marker includes:

“On April 19, 1864, General Joseph E. Johnston reviewed the Confederate Army of Tennessee on this ridge. After his appointment in December 1863, Johnston rebuilt a defeated and demoralized army following Confederate General Braxton Bragg’s defeat at the Battle of Missionary Ridge in November 1863. When Union General William T. Sherman began to advance on Dalton, Confederate troops moved into defensive positions. On May 13, 1864, Johnston’s troops evacuated Dalton to defend Resaca, and the Atlanta Campaign was underway. This was the last grand review of the Army of Tennessee and came on the eve of Sherman’s campaign to capture Atlanta and the subsequent March to the Sea.”

The entrance is now adorned with a Civil War cannon replica to signify the past struggles our forefathers knew. Civil war historians travel through Dalton everyday and appreciate the tribute the city has given to their heritage. Dalton is home to the only known bronze statue of General Joseph E. Johnston and is one of the many stops along the Blue & Gray Trail, a network of sites acclaimed as important locations associated with the Atlanta Campaign of the Civil War.

### **The Ball is Still Rolling**

The physical work at the West Hill Chapel is complete, but there is still much to be done. The city continues efforts to utilize the facility as much as possible. Over the few months of completion, the Chapel has housed weddings, special events and board meetings. It will be highlighted during a visit by the Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation Ramble in June 2004.

The Chapel continues to be a topic of conversation throughout the community and residents are enthusiastic about using it for special functions. The city of Dalton underestimated the positive response from the community and is working hard each year to preserve more and more historic sites.

West Hill Cemetery sees its share of use on a daily basis with funeral services and exercise fanatics treading through the property. Crews work daily on tree plantings and preserving the dated monuments. And Alderman Terry Christie still enjoys his morning walks through the cemetery, as well as taking great pleasure in his walk to restoration.